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ABSTRACT

The term "servant leadership" involves putting people and ethical considerations intentionally ahead of short term institutional or personal self-interest. In the 1960s, Robert K. Greenleaf wrote the first of several books on servant leadership, arguing that institutions were both the glory and bane of modern society because they extended essential human services beyond the wealthy few, but also often behaved in unresponsive, bureaucratic, and destructive ways. The servant leader's central mission is to call institutions back to their fundamental mission of service, raising the institution's capacity to serve and to perform as a servant. Servant leaders are characterized by the use of persuasion over coercion, sustaining spirit over ego, foresight over control, listening over directing, acceptance over judgment, and systematic neglect over perfectionism. Structural changes will be required in the shape and culture of institutions, including the need for trustees to take on a regenerative role and to have more authority in staffing college administrations, while true servant institutions will modify hierarchies into teams, honor questioning and criticism, and address the corrupting influence of power. While community colleges are the most vital servant institutions of this century, they should not think that reforms are not needed with respect to the use of coercion with college students, the operation of boards of trustees, and the continued use of hierarchies. (HAA)

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SERVANT LEADERSHIP:

ROBERT K. GREENLEAF'S LEGACY AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

By

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Sanford C. "Sandy" Shugart is in his sixth year as president of North Harris College, a comprehensive community college of some 10,000 credit and 20,000 continuing education students in the North Harris Montgomery Community College District, situated in the northern margins of Houston, Texas. Prior to this, he served as Vice President and Chief Academic Officer of the North Carolina Community College System. He earned a B.S., M.A.T., and Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Sandy is married with two children and one on the way.

The term "servant leadership" has begun to find its way into management literature and common usage in our organizations. To most it represents some kind of fundamental reorientation to a core of values for both our leaders and our organizations, involving putting people and ethical considerations intentionally ahead of short term institutional or personal self-interest. Many find this especially attractive in this era of profound organizational changes that threaten to marginalize both those who work in the organizations and those our institutions were created to serve. But to most, the concept is no clearer than this, and represents in the main a yearning for value, for respect for the human spirit in the workplace.

In the late 1960s, after a lengthy career in organizational research with AT&T, Robert K. Greenleaf retired and began to develop his thoughts on organizational life and leadership in the form of essays. Within a very few years, the reflections of this gentle Quaker man had captured a wide audience and were collectively published in the first of several books, Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness. Other publications followed, as corporations, colleges and universities, and others began looking seriously at introducing his concepts into the practice of their leaders and the culture and structure of their institutions. Although Mr. Greenleaf died in 1990, his work continues to be supported through the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The central themes of Greenleaf's thought on servant leadership can be summarized from excerpts from his own work. This summary will include an overview of the principle of servant leadership, the mission of servant leadership, and the character of servant leadership at both the individual and institutional level.

The Principle of Servant Leadership

In one of his earliest essays on the topic, Greenleaf wrote,

> **"A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader....Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants."**

Greenleaf not only spent his whole career in the largest corporation in the world, but also found himself deeply engaged as a trustee and consultant with colleges and universities

during the turbulent period of the late 1960s. These experiences combined to cause him to reflect deeply on issues of institutional alienation, the legitimacy of authority, and new models of leadership. The principles above undergird all of his later thought and writing.

The Mission of Servant Leadership

"This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions..."

Greenleaf believed that our institutions were the glory and the bane of modern society. They are our glory because they permitted for the first time in history the extension of essential human services like health care and education beyond the wealthy few to the masses. Our hospitals, schools, universities, social agencies, etc. are one of the twentieth century's greatest achievements. But these institutions are also a bane on our existence, as anyone can tell you who has waited, injured in a hospital emergency room while health insurance is verified. The great frustration is that they were created to be of service, but often behave in unresponsive, bureaucratic, even destructive ways. Greenleaf would argue that they do this because institutions have lives of their own. They are not merely the sum total of the more or less good or evil people who populate them. And over the long term, these institutions, as well as business organizations, will behave in ways that preserve the organization, even at the expense of the clients they are supposed to serve.

Therefore, Greenleaf sees as the central mission of the servant leader calling the institution back to its fundamental mission of service:

"..to raise the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them."

He describes it as "redemptive" work and explores in some detail the role of the trustees, the organizational structure, the work of the formal and informal leaders, and some of the processes of governance and management that will serve to regenerate the organization.

The Character of Servant Leadership

Greenleaf believed deeply that only a servant leader could successfully call an institution back to its basic servant ethic. Much of his best work was spent in reflection on the basic characteristics of an effective servant leader. For Greenleaf, a servant leader was characterized by a pattern of:

- persuasion over coercion

- "*entheos*" or sustaining spirit over ego

- foresight over control

- listening over directing

- acceptance and healing over judgment

- the art of "systematic neglect" over perfectionism.

Beneath all of these patterns I a servant leader, Greenleaf found a basic commitment to the work community marked **"by each servant leader demonstrating his or her unlimited liability for a specific community related group."**

To guide the individual choices that beset all leaders in our complex organizations, Greenleaf developed a sort of standard against which to test the decision:

"Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? What is the effect on the least privileged in society: will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?"

Much of what Greenleaf writes on the subject of the servant leader resonates with a growing popular management press. The work of Kenneth Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Hyler Bracey, Scott Peck, and others contains many of the same principles of leadership behavior and style commended by Greenleaf. And the dramatic growth in the popularity of these various writers suggests that Greenleaf's hypotheses about leadership have found fertile ground in which to grow.

The Institution as Servant

Unlike much of the current literature, however, Greenleaf goes beyond the notion of a heroic servant leader transforming an organization. He points to a number of structural changes in the shape and culture of the institution that are necessary for its regeneration and continued health. Foremost among these is that the institution must be led by "regenerative trustees:"

"..the questionable performance of major institutions is not the result of incompetence or poor motives or lack of industry in the internal administration and leadership, but stems rather from an inadequate concept of trust in the governing boards and their failure to accept a more demanding role."

Several of Greenleaf's essays dwell on the preparation of trustees for more demanding roles and their obligation to accept them. This also reorders, to some extent, the way that

the trustees and senior officers share authority in the organization. Greenleaf, for example, believes that the trustees have responsibility not only for the hiring of the CEO, but also the design and staffing of the entire senior administration. In recommendations that would chill the heart of most college presidents, he even argues for an independent staff function to keep the board independently informed!

In other areas of organizational behavior, Greenleaf argues that a servant institution:

- modifies its hierarchy into teams based on a principle of "*primus inter pares*"

- honors questions and criticism

- systematically attends to its legitimacy

- acknowledges and tends to the corrupting influence of power

- makes explicit its aspirations to serve and monitors both the accomplishments and the attitudes of the served

- balances the stability of good administration with the creativity of leadership

- builds trust by performance and rejects both blind trust and trust based on charisma.

Issues for Community Colleges

Our colleges are perhaps the most vital of the servant institutions created in the twentieth century. But before we pat ourselves on the back, we would do well to recognize that this may be no more than a reflection of our institutional youth. With time, we are probably subject to the same internal forces that ultimately turn clients into sources of revenue, or worse, distractions.

Among other issues this raises for community colleges are the following:

- Are we falling prey to what Greenleaf called "the presumption of virtue?" In one of his essays, he doubted that best pioneering work in servant leadership would be done in institutions like ours because we are blinded to much of our own institutional failure by our overriding ethical mission and thus reluctant to believe reforms are needed.

- Greenleaf wrote much about the problem of power and coercion, especially of students in colleges. Are our ethical senses dulled to the thorny problems of compelling even adult students to do things our way?

- Can anyone imagine a community college president willingly giving more authority to the board of trustees? or the trustees making the investment of time and sacrificial support necessary to healthy trusteeship?

- Has anyone seen the *primus* concept at work? Could it work in the senior administration of your college?

- What mission do we have for developing a new generation of leaders, equipped with a new set of assumptions about the nature of leading and following?